

Op-Ed by Deputy Secretary of State Burns

“Now is the Time to Support the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights”

When Maria da Penha’s husband shot her in the back, leaving her paraplegic, it was the culmination of years of domestic abuse. In her battle for justice, she was fortunate to have an ally in the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), a respected independent body, established in 1959 to protect the rights of all individuals throughout the Americas. Following the Commission’s inquiry into her case, the Brazilian government took decisive steps - Maria’s ex-husband went to jail, and in 2006 Brazil adopted landmark legislation on violence against women.

Today, it is the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights itself that is under assault and must be defended. Over the past year, a determined minority of governments have tried to undermine the autonomy and integrity of this institution. Their motivations are varied but they add up to a significant threat to human rights and dignity. In some countries, populist leaders impatient with or frustrated by democratic processes are exercising greater control over the media, courts, and legislatures – and see the Commission’s oversight as an impediment to their ambitions. In other cases, governments have allowed parochial disagreements with specific commission rulings to eclipse their larger appreciation of its role in the hemisphere.

The United States understands that many countries in the region are wary of unwarranted interventionism. But that’s no reason to chip away at an institution that has lifted the cause of human rights. The Western Hemisphere has been at the vanguard in setting standards for democracy that are admired around the globe. The leaders of many of today’s democracies in the Americas – including some of the Commission’s harshest critics – were fighting for these rights not so long ago.

During the Cold War, the Commission faced down military strongmen, documented forced disappearances, and catalogued the human costs of brutal civil wars. In the 1980s and 90s, as democracy took hold, the Commission buttressed regional progress by challenging the legacies of authoritarianism: impunity for past atrocities, discrimination against women and minorities, and media censorship. In recent years, it has worked to address violence against women, indigenous rights, and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

To be sure, a strong, independent watchdog can generate discomfort for governments, including our own -- but true democracies should welcome scrutiny and embrace the opportunity to improve human rights practices. That is why the United States is committed to sustained funding for the Commission and encourages our hemispheric partners to do the same.

We also respond to the Commission when it challenges us on issues like the death penalty, the human rights of migrants and incarcerated children, and the status of detainees at the Guantánamo Bay detention facility. In each of these cases, the United States has constructively engaged with the Commission and civil society to address matters of concern.

There’s no doubt that we can make the Inter-American human rights system more efficient -- but reform must not become a code word for diminishing the Commission’s autonomy, independence and integrity.

The democracies of our hemisphere must continue to stand for justice, transparency, the rule of law, and human dignity in our region and beyond. When the nations of the Americas gather at the Organization of American States (OAS) in Washington this week, they will determine whether their citizens will continue to have on their side a proven and impartial champion of human rights, as Maria da Penha did. The United States' position on this is clear: we must now stand together to defend and fully fund the organization that has defended us for so long.